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Kamehameha steps out from shadows Statue in U.S. Capitol moved from obscurity to new visitors center

By Dennis Camire

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WASHINGTON — The bronze and gold statue of Hawai'i's King Kamehameha, standing in obscurity for decades in the U.S. Capitol, is expected to attract much more attention with its new home in the recently opened Capitol Visitors Center.

Now, visitors who tour the Capitol will be hard pressed to miss the statue of the warrior king who unified the Hawaiian Islands under his rule in 1810.

"Now that the statue has a more prominent location . . . I am sure that it will inspire visitors to learn more about Hawai'i's proud history," said Sen. Dan Akaka, D-Hawai'i.

It might since the most common question from visitors looking at the statue is who was Kamehameha, said U.S. Rep. Neil Abercrombie, D-Hawai'i.

"The answer is it is a statue of an early American hero, a visionary leader who united a distinct and indigenous people," Abercrombie said. "His story and the story of all Hawai'i's people are an important part of the American fabric."

The striking 12-foot-tall statue, unveiled in 1969, was moved in September from a dark, back row in the Capitol's Statuary Hall and now stands under glass skylights, looking out over the center's large Emancipation Hall.

"The first time I saw him in his new home . . . it appeared that he was standing more upright," said Darlene Kehaulani Butts, president of Ke Ali'i Maka'ainana Hawaiian Civic Club for the Washington region.

"His shoulders were back. His chest had expanded," Butts said. "He filled the room as far as we were concerned."

But the new location didn't come without opposition.

Sarah Ulis, president of the Hawai'i State Society, said that when she first learned that the statue was going to be moved, she was adamantly opposed.

"I thought its location at the time was in the pantheon of Americana in Statuary Hall," she said. "I didn't want it to be moved."

But Ulis said she was won over when she toured the new visitors center, which opened in December, while it was under construction and saw the proposed placement.

"Now . . . he is under the sunshine. He is where he should be," she said. "It's absolutely stunning and we are thrilled with where he is."

Kamehameha's move also marks the end of a colorful and somewhat controversial chapter in the statue's history attributable to Capitol tour guides who relayed stories about why the statue was in such an obscure place in Statuary Hall.

"Every single story related to the fact that he was in the corner in the dark because he was not properly clad," Butts said.

In 2003, Abercrombie and former Rep. Ed Case, D-Hawai'i, wrote to Alan Hantman, then architect of the Capitol, asking him to put the statue in a more prominent spot to help end the "disrespectful characterizations." The letter was prompted when a tour guide was videotaped saying the statue was in the back corner because Kamehameha wasn't decently dressed.

The dark bronze statue is clad in gilded regalia that Kamehameha would have worn as king, including a feathered helmet and cloak.

The statue's former location was chosen because of its weight — more than 6 tons with its solid granite base, according to the architect of the Capitol. It is one of the heaviest objects in the National Statuary Hall Collection and needed to be put in a spot where the floor could support it.

When the visitors center was planned, the statue's supporters, including the state's congressional delegation, urged that it include a place for King Kamehameha.

But because the center was being built underground, a major concern was ensuring the statue be located where no person or thing could travel over the king's head, which is culturally inappropriate for Hawai'i, Butts said.

Placing Kamehameha under the skylights solved the problem, she said.

With the statue in a much more spacious location, Hawai'i supporters expect an even greater crowd at the King Kamehameha Day celebration June 8. The event includes draping the king's statue with lei.

Butts said an invitation would be extended to Hawai'i-born President Obama and his family. Contacts also have been made with the 26 hula schools and groups in the District of Columbia, Virginia and Maryland, and about 250 dancers are expected to perform, she said.

"We are thrilled about where he is and the significance of his presence in Emancipation Hall," Butts said.